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Letter to the Editor

Endovascular Treatment of Distal-M2 Segment Occlusions: A Clinical Registry and Meta-Analysis

Sacha Bensoussan,[1] Stephanos Nikolaos Finitsis,[2] Bertrand Lapergue,[3] Gaultier Marnat,[4] Igor Sibon,[5] Solène Moulin,[6] Jean-Marc Olivot,[7] Sébastien Richard,[8] Charlotte Rosso,[9] Benjamin Gory,[10] Frédéric Clarençon;[1,11] on behalf of the ETIS Registry Investigators

[1]Department of Neuroradiology, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, APHP, Sorbonne University, Paris, France
[2]Department of Radiology, University General Hospital of Thessaloniki AHEPA, Thessaloniki, Greece
[3]Department of Vascular Neurology, Foch Hospital, Suresnes, France
[4]Department of Neuroradiology, Bordeaux University Hospital, Bordeaux, France
[5]Department of Neurology, Bordeaux University Hospital, Bordeaux, France
[6]Department of Neurology, Reims University Hospital, Reims, France
[7]Department of Vascular Neurology, Toulouse University Hospital, Toulouse, France
[8]Department of Neurology, Stroke Unit, INSERM U1116, CHRU-Nancy, Université de Lorraine, Nancy, France
[9]Stroke Unit, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, APHP, Sorbonne University, Paris, France
[10]Department of Diagnostic and Therapeutic Neuroradiology, INSERM U1254, CHRU-Nancy, Université de Lorraine, Nancy, France
[11]GRC BioFast, Sorbonne University, Paris, France

Dear Sir:

Pending the results of randomized controlled trials (RCT) evaluating endovascular treatment (EVT) for distal occlusions, we aimed to investigate the safety and efficacy profiles of EVT for distal-M2 strokes in clinical practice.

We report data from the multicentric prospective registry ETIS (Endovascular Treatment for Ischemic Stroke) (ClinicalTrials.gov Identifier: NCT03776877) including 21 stroke centers in France. Our study received approval from our Intstitutionl Review Board (ID RCB 2017-A03457-46). Oral informed consent from the patient and/or a trustworthy person was collected by local investigators. We included patients with the following criteria: age ≥18 years; acute ischemic stroke (AIS) due to primary distal-M2 occlusion; and time from symptom onset to puncture ≤6 hours. An M2 occlusion was considered distal if it was above the horizontal line delineating the mid-height of the insula. The primary outcome was a favorable outcome, defined as a modified Rankin Scale (mRS) ≤2 at 90 days. Secondary outcomes included excellent outcome (mRS ≤1 at 90 days); 90-day all-cause mortality; early neurological improvement defined as a National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) ≤1 or an improvement of ≥8 points compared with baseline at 24 hours post-EVT; procedure-related complications, including embolus to a new territory, perforation, and dissection; parenchymal hematoma (PH); symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage (sICH) defined as a hemorrhage on the follow-up computed tomography/magnetic resonance imaging scan and an increase of 4 points in the NIHSS score, according to the European Collaborative Acute Stroke Study classifications;[1] successful reperfusion defined as an improvement of at least 1 point in the modified Thrombolysis In Cerebral Infarction (mTICI) score between the first and the last angiogram (2a to 2b-2c-3, 2b to 2c-3). An additional systematic review with meta-analysis has been performed on distal-M2 thrombectomy and is detailed in Supplementary Material.

To identify outcome predictors in the present series, multiple regression models were fitted using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC).[2] Missing data were excluded. All analyses were completed using Stata 17 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA), RStudio version 1.4.1106 (https://posit.co/), and the R General Package for Meta-Analysis (version 6.0-0; R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria).

During the study period, 157 patients underwent EVT for an AIS due to a distal-M2 occlusion. Demographic and procedural data are shown in Table 1. Median NIHSS at baseline was 12

Table 1. Baseline characteristics and outcomes of patients who underwent EVT for a distal-M2 occlusion in the ETIS cohort

Characteristics	Total (n=157)	Missing values (%)
Age (yr), mean±SD	71±15	0 (0.0)
Female sex	74 (47.1)	0 (0.0)
Medical history		
Hypertension	105 (68.2)	3 (1.9)
Hypercholesterolemia	64 (41.8)	4 (2.6)
Smoking	28 (18.9)	9 (5.7)
Diabetes	26 (17.2)	6 (3.8)
Previous stroke	32 (21.1)	5 (3.2)
Coronaropathy	40 (26.0)	3 (1.9)
Pre-stroke mRS ≤2	143 (92.9)	3 (1.9)
Prior antithrombotic therapy	77 (50.0)	3 (1.9)
Current stroke event		
Right side	54 (35.5)	5 (3.2)
Systolic BP (mm Hg), mean±SD	151±26	19 (12.1)
Diastolic BP (mm Hg), mean±SD	85±19	20 (12.7)
Glycemia (mmol/L), mean±SD	7±3	27 (17.2)
Initial NIHSS, median [IQR]	12 [11]	9 (5.7)
ASPECTS at admission, median [IQR]	9 [3]	22 (14.0)
Intravenous thrombolysis	84 (54.2)	2 (1.3)
Cardioembolic etiology	92 (62.6)	10 (6.4)
Procedural data		
Anesthesia type		2 (1.3)
General anesthesia	37 (23.9)	
No anesthesia/Local anesthesia	35 (22.6)	
Conscious sedation	83 (53.5)	
First-line thrombectomy strategy		6 (3.8)
Stent retriever	13 (8.6)	
Contact aspiration	58 (38.2)	
Combined	80 (52.6)	
Balloon catheter	46 (30.9)	8 (5.1)
Angioplasty	1 (0.7)	21 (13.4)
Total number of passes, median [IQR]	1 [1]	29 (18.5)
First-pass mTICI 3	38 (32.5)	40 (25.5)
At least 1 mTICI point recanalization	111 (84.7)	26 (16.6)
Procedural complications	28 (17.9)	1 (0.6)
Workflow		
Time from symptom onset to puncture (min), median [IQR]	260 [130]	54 (34.4)
Time from puncture to recanalization (min), median [IQR]	35 [31]	30 (19.1)
Time from symptom onset to recanalization (min), median [IQR]	295 [125]	31 (19.8)
Outcome		
Early neurological improvement	70 (44.6)	0 (0.0)
Parenchymal hematoma	9 (7.0)	29 (18.4)
Symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage	7 (5.2)	23 (14.6)
mRS ≤2 at 90 days	61 (46.2)	25 (15.9)
mRS ≤1 at 90 days	48 (36.4)	25 (15.9)
Mortality at 90 days	22 (16.7)	25 (15.9)

Values are expressed as n (%) unless otherwise indicated.
EVT, endovascular treatment; ETIS, Endovascular Treatment for Ischemic Stroke; SD, standard deviation; mRS, modified Rankin Scale; BP, blood pressure; NIHSS, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale; IQR, interquartile range; ASPECTS, Alberta Stroke Program Early CT Score; mTICI, modified Thrombolysis In Cerebral Infarction.

(interquartile range [IQR]: 11). The median time between onset to puncture was 260 minutes (IQR: 130), and 84 patients (54.2%) received prior intravenous thrombolysis. Ninety-seven patients (63.8%) had a left distal-M2 occlusion.

Successful reperfusion was achieved in 111 patients (84.7%), and 38 patients (32.5%) had an mTICI score of 3 after the first pass. In the multivariate analysis, successful reperfusion was associated with the total number of passes (odds ratio [OR] 0.41, 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.23–0.72, *P*=0.002) and the use of contact aspiration alone versus a stent retriever alone (OR 6.47, 95% CI 1.3–32, *P*=0.022). The later association was neither found amongst all M2 occlusions (i.e., proximal and distal) in the ETIS registry[3] nor in the ASTER (Contact Aspiration Versus Stent Retriever for Successful Revascularization) trial,[4] and has to be cautiously interpreted. Atchaneeyasakul et al.[5] found that the utilization of a stent retriever in M2 occlusions resulted in more successful reperfusion compared to a pump aspiration system, but reperfusion outcomes were similar when comparing stent retriever to newer-generation pump aspiration catheter (e.g., Penumbra System ACE or MAX series). Also, the choice of first-line thrombectomy strategy was left at the discretion of the operator in our cohort. Larger prospective data comparing contact aspiration versus stent retrievers with the most recent devices are needed to confirm this association.

PH after EVT was seen in 9 patients (7.0%) and sICH was observed in 7 patients (5.2%). sICH was associated with a high systolic blood pressure at admission (OR 1.03, 95% CI 1.002–1.06, *P*=0.034). The rate of sICH in this series was lower to what was found on proximal-M2 occlusion in the ETIS registry reported by Muszynski et al.[3] (9.4%) and suggests that EVT for distal-M2 occlusions does not carry an additional risk of sICH.

Sixty-one patients (46.2%) achieved a favorable outcome. In

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the multivariate analysis, a favorable outcome was associated with age (OR 0.93, 95% CI 0.90–0.96, *P*<0.001), NIHSS at baseline (OR 0.85, 95% CI 0.78–0.92, *P*<0.001), and early neurological improvement (OR 5.68, 95% CI 2.09–15.42, *P*<0.001). Excellent outcome was observed in 48 patients (36.4%). Different factors could explain this low rate of favorable outcome for a distal occlusion: our large sample size (157 patients), a relatively low rate of intravenous thrombolysis in our series (54.2%), a longer time from symptom onset to treatment (260 min), and a high median NIHSS at baseline (12) with a large predominance of left distal-M2 occlusions (63.8%) supplying eloquent areas of the brain.

Mortality at 90 days was recorded in 22 patients (16.7%) and in the multivariate analysis was associated with age (OR 1.15, 95% CI 1.05–1.27, *P*=0.003) and female sex (OR 0.02, 95% CI 0.002–0.31, *P*=0.004). It suggests that AIS due to distal-M2 occlusions are often deadly, despite EVT and best medical treatment.

Predictors of successful reperfusion, sICH, favorable outcome, and mortality at 90 days are detailed in Table 2.

The strengths of our study are: (1) its prospective and multicentric design; (2) the large number of patients included compared to the previous series published on distal-M2 EVT; and (3) the systematic reporting of outcome data adopted by the participating centers of the ETIS registry. Nevertheless, the data drawn from the ETIS registry have some limitations: (1) the decision of thrombectomy was left at the discretion of the operator with

Table 2. Predictors of successful reperfusion, sICH, favorable outcome, and mortality at 90 days

Predictor	Total (n=157)		Unadjusted OR (95% CI)	*P*	Adjusted OR* (95% CI)	*P*
	Yes	No				
Successful reperfusion	111 (84.7)	20 (15.3)				
Total number of passes, median [IQR]	1 [1]	2 [2]	0.57 (0.37–0.89)	0.015	0.41 (0.23–0.72)	0.002
First-line thrombectomy strategy						
Stent retriever	10 (9.1)	2 (10.5)	Base			
Contact aspiration	48 (43.6)	6 (31.6)	1.60 (0.28–9.10)	0.596	6.47 (1.30–32.00)	0.022
Combined	51 (46.4)	11 (57.9)	0.92 (0.17–4.83)	0.929	NA	
Other	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	NA		NA	
sICH	7 (5.2)	127 (94.8)				
SBP at admission (mm Hg), mean±SD	175±28	150±26	1.03 (1.002–1.06)	0.034		
Favorable outcome	61 (46.2)	71 (53.8)				
Age (yr), mean±SD	66±14	77±13	0.94 (0.91–0.96)	<0.001	0.93 (0.90–0.96)	<0.001
History of blood hypertension	32 (53.3)	55 (79.7)	0.29 (0.13–0.63)	0.002		
Previous stroke	7 (11.9)	19 (27.9)	0.34 (0.13–0.89)	0.029		
Pre-stroke mRS ≤2	59 (98.3)	59 (85.5)	9.99 (1.24–80.61)	0.031		
Initial NIHSS, median [IQR]	10 [8]	15 [10]	0.86 (0.81–0.92)	<0.001	0.85 (0.78–0.92)	<0.001
ENI	35 (57.4)	21 (29.6)	3.20 (1.56–6.57)	0.002	5.68 (2.09–15.42)	0.001
Mortality at 90 days	22 (16.7)	110 (83.3)				
Age (yr), mean±SD	82±8	70±15	1.08 (1.02–1.13)	0.002	1.15 (1.05–1.27)	0.003
Female	5 (22.7)	59 (53.6)	0.25 (0.08–0.73)	0.012	0.02 (0.002–0.31)	0.004
History of hypertension	19 (90.5)	68 (63)	5.58 (1.23–25.25)	0.025		
Previous stroke	8 (40)	18 (16.8)	3.29 (1.17–9.21)	0.023		
Coronaropathy	11 (55)	23 (21.1)	4.57 (1.69–12.34)	0.003		
Prior antithrombotic therapy	15 (75)	52 (47.7)	3.28 (1.11–9.68)	0.031		
Pre-stroke mRS ≤2	16 (80)	102 (93.6)	3.29 (1.17–9.21)	0.023		
Cardioembolic etiology	18 (81.8)	62 (57.4)	3.33 (1.05–10.52)	0.040		
sICH	3 (15)	3 (3)	5.7 (1.06–30.65)	0.042	6.34 (0.90–44.50)	0.063

Values are expressed as n (%) unless otherwise indicated. *P*-values were considered statistically significant if <0.05.
sICH, symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; IQR, interquartile range; NA, not available; SBP, systolic blood pressure; SD, standard deviatioin; mRS, modified Rankin Scale; NIHSS, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale; ENI, early neurological improvement; AIC, Akaike information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criterion.
*The adjusted model was constructed according to the AIC/BIC information criterion.

a risk of selection bias, especially toward distal-M2 strokes that are more clinically severe, and outside the time window for intravenous thrombolysis; (2) no comparative group of distal-M2 strokes treated with the best medical treatment was available to assess the additional benefit of thrombectomy; and (3) it is limited to French stroke centers and might not be applicable to other populations.

In conclusion, EVT for distal-M2 occlusions resulted in a high rate of successful reperfusion and favored contact aspiration over the use of a stent retriever only in our study. RCTs are needed to demonstrate a potential benefit of EVT in addition to intravenous thrombolysis and identify the safest and most efficient first-line thrombectomy strategy in regard to this indication.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary materials related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.5853/jos.2022.03692.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

Author contribution

Conceptualization: SNF, BG, FC. Study design: SB, SNF, BL, BG, FC. Methodology: SB, SNF, BG, FC. Data collection: SNF, BL, GM, IS, SM, JMO, SR, CR, BG, FC. Investigation: SNF, BL, GM, IS, SM, JMO, SR, CR, BG, FC. Statistical analysis: SNF. Writing—original draft: SB, SNF. Writing—review & editing: SNF, BL, GM, IS, SM, JMO, SR, CR, BG, FC. Funding acquisition: BL, BG, FC. Approval of final manuscript: all authors.

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List of ETIS Investigators is given in Appendix 1.

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Correspondence: Frédéric Clarençon
47 Boulevard de l'hôpital, 75013, Paris, France
Tel: +33 1 42 16 35 43
E-mail: frederic.clarencon@aphp.fr
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6442-8239

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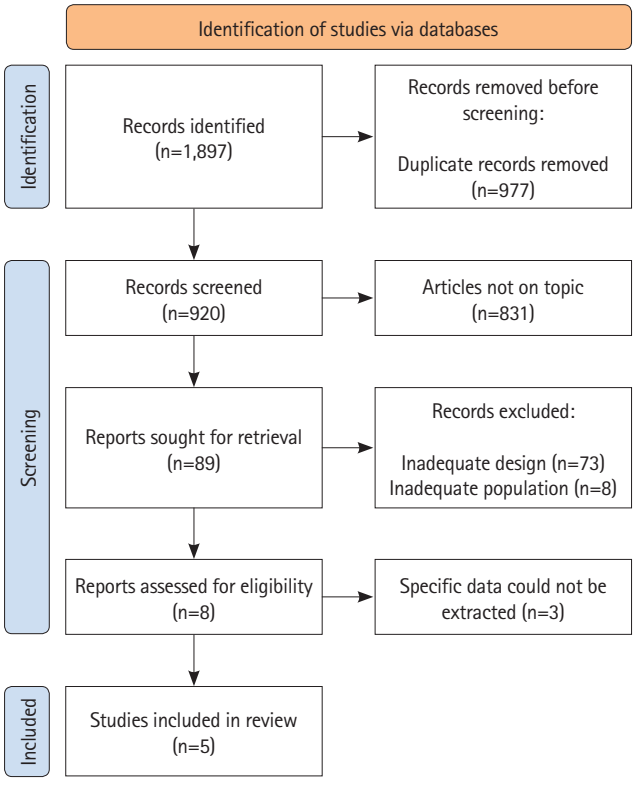
Supplementary Material. Systematic review and meta-analysis on endovascular treatment for distal-M2 occlusions

A recent consensus statement defining distal and medium vessel occlusions (DMVOs) highlighted the peculiar nature of the M2-segment of the middle cerebral artery (MCA) that experts do not firmly classify as a DMVO or large vessel occlusion (LVO).[1] The diameter of the M2-segment ranges from 1.1 mm to 2.4 mm, with a proximal segment very close in diameter to the M1-segment (around 3 mm), especially for a dominant branch, and a distal segment closer to the M3-segment (1.1 mm to 1.5 mm).[1-3] Additional awareness has been raised about the high variability of the M1-segment anatomy and its branching patterns so that some proximal-M2 occlusions are described functionally as "M1-like."[4-6] Distinguishing between proximal-M2 occlusions and distal-M2 occlusions seems reasonable and clinically relevant, as we could consider this segmentation to be the threshold between LVOs and DMVOs.

In addition to the ETIS (Endovascular Treatment for Ischemic Stroke) study, we performed a comprehensive systematic search of PubMed, MEDLINE, Embase, and Cochrane databases following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines[7] on endovascular treatment (EVT) for distal-M2 strokes. No written review protocol was prepared, and the review was not registered before its realization. We used the keywords: "thrombectomy," "endovascular treatment," "stroke," "occlusion," "M2," and "distal" combined with Boolean operators to increase search sensitivity and specificity. Initial screening and study selection were performed using Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, Melbourne, Australia), a web application for systematic reviews, by two independent reviewers. We included articles published in the English language between the inception of each database and March 2022, reporting EVT of acute ischemic stroke due to primary distal-M2 occlusion. Articles reporting fewer than five cases and cadaveric, animal, or *in vitro* studies were excluded. Articles reporting patients with distal-M2 occlusion among other occlusion locations were assessed in full text to determine whether data specific to distal-M2 could be separately extracted. If not possible, these studies were excluded. Centers and periods of each study were assessed, and those with overlapping populations were excluded while maintaining the article with the most recent and complete dataset to avoid the risk of multiplicity. Information extracted from each study included sample size, age, treatment modality, percentage of patients receiving intravenous thrombolysis, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) at admission, time from symptoms onset to puncture, rate of successful recanalization, rate of symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage (sICH), clinical outcomes, and mortality at 90 days. A favorable outcome was defined as achieving a modified Rankin Scale (mRS) ≤2. Successful recanalization and sICH were considered according to the definition provided in each study. Muszynski et al.[8] reported data on 67 distal-M2 occlusions from the ETIS registry; therefore, we pooled this article with the most recent data from the ETIS registry and labeled it as "current series" in the meta-analysis. An assessment of the risk of bias for each study was made independently by the two reviewers.

In the meta-analysis, estimated rates of reperfusion, good clinical outcome, sICH, and mortality at 90 days were weighted for each study sample size. Odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for pooled data for good recanalization, sICH, favorable outcomes, and mortality were also calculated. The extent of heterogeneity among studies was assessed with an I^2 test. Pooled analyses were performed with fixed effect and DerSimonian and Laird random-effects models. All analyses were completed using Stata 17 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA), RStudio version 1.4.1106 (https://posit.co/), and the R General Package for Meta-Analysis (version 6.0-0; R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria).



Supplementary Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart of study search and inclusion adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template.[7]

Supplementary Table 1. Quality assessment of the studies included in the meta-analysis

Study (year)	Main limitations
Tomsick et al.[11] (2017)	Open-label, M2 occlusion retrospectively assessed, incomplete outcome data, risk of selective outcome reporting
de Castro Afonso et al.[12] (2019)	Retrospective design, open-label, single center, small sample size, no control arm.
Ivan et al.[9] (2020)	Retrospective design, open-label, single center, no control arm, incomplete outcome data.
de Havenon et al.[10] (2021)	Open-label, no control arm
Current series	Open-label, no control arm

Supplementary Table 2. Judgements about each risk of bias item for each included study in the meta-analysis

	Tomsick et al.,[11] 2017	de Castro Afonso et al.,[12] 2019	Ivan et al.,[9] 2020	de Havenon et al.,[10] 2021	Current series
Random sequence generation (selection bias)					
Allocation concealment (selection bias)					
Blinding of participants and personal (performance bias)					
Blinding of outcome assessors					
Incomplete outcome data (attrition bias)					
Selective outcome reporting					
Other bias					

Green indicates a low risk of bias. Red indicates a high risk of bias.

Supplementary Table 3. Demographic, procedural and outcome data of the studies included in the meta-analysis

	Tomsick et al.[11]	de Castro Afonso et al.[12]	Ivan et al.[9]	de Havenon et al.[10]	Current series
Year	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022
Study design	Multicenter, retrospective (IMS III)	Single center, prospective	Single center, retrospective	Multicenter, retrospective (ARISE II)	Multicenter, prospective
Country	North America, Australia, Europe	Brazil	Germany	United States, Europe	France
Number of patients	28	8	23	30	157
Age (yr), mean (SD)	NA	69.2 (NA)	73 (13.3)	71.2 (12)	71 (15)
Female	NA	14 (45)	34 (59.6)	27 (47.4)	74 (47.1)
Intravenous thrombolysis	NA	19 (63.3)	43 (75.4)	57 (100)	84 (54.2)
NIHSS, median (IQR)	NA	15.5 (7.5)	11 (NA)	14 (6)	12 (11)
ASPECTS, median (IQR)	NA	9.5 (2.5)	10 (NA)	10 (1)	9 (3)
Time from symptom onset to treatment (min)	NA	261 (104) (mean, SD)	227 (70) (mean, SD)	208 (80) (mean, SD)	260 (130) (median, IQR)
Time from puncture to recanalization (min)	NA	47.5 (29.8) (median, IQR)	68 (42) (mean, SD)	NA	35 (31) (median, IQR)
Complete or partial recanalization	8 (28.6)	8 (100.0)	NA	27 (90.0)	111 (84.7)
mRS ≤2 at 90 days	NA	4 (50.0)	NA	23 (76.7)	61 (46.2)
sICH	NA	NA	5 (22)	NA	7 (5.2)
Mortality at 90 days	NA	3 (37.5)	3 (13) (mortality during hospitalization)	3 (10)	22 (16.7)

Demographic and procedural data are reported for all M2 occlusions in the study as specific data on distal-M2 occlusions were not available. Outcome data are specific to distal-M2 occlusions. Data are presented as number (%) unless otherwise indicated.
IMS III, Interventional Management of Stroke III trial; ARISE II, Analysis of Revascularization in Ischemic Stroke with EmboTrap trial; SD, standard deviation; NA, not available; NIHSS, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale; IQR, interquartile range; ASPECTS, Alberta Stroke Program Early CT Score; mRS, modified Rankin Scale; sICH, symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage.

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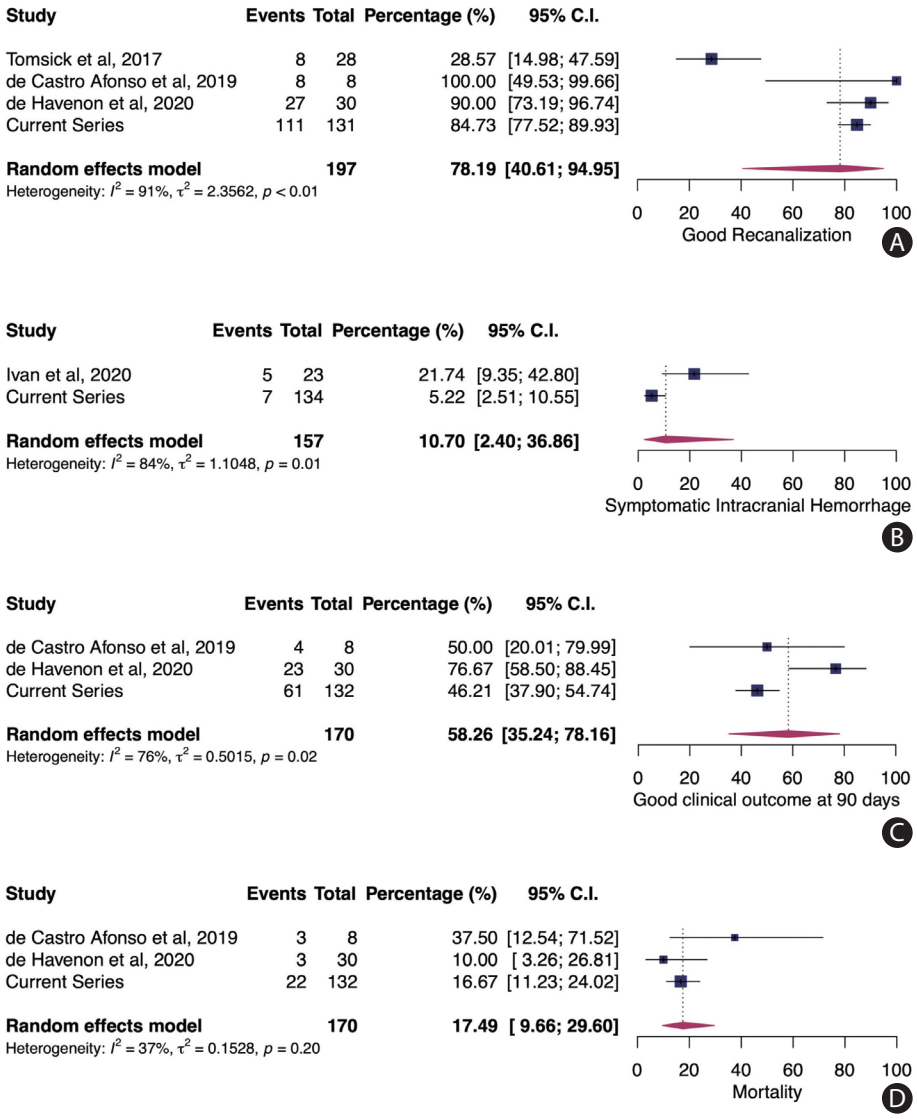

Supplementary Figure 2. Forest plots from the pooled data of the meta-analysis for (A) successful recanalization; (B) symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage; (C) 90-day favorable outcome; and (D) 90-day all-cause mortality.[9-12] Good recanalization and symptomatic intracranial hemorrhage are reported according to the original study definition. Good clinical outcome is defined as mRS ≤2 at 90 days. mRS, modified Rankin Scale; CI, confidence interval.

The research identified 1,897 records related to the keywords chosen. After removal of duplicates (n=977), articles not on the topic (n=831), articles with inadequate design (n=73), inadequate population (n=8), and articles in which specific data could not be extracted (n=3), five studies were finally included in the review[8-12] (PRISMA flowchart is detailed in Supplementary Figure 1).

The outcome data on EVT for distal-M2 occlusions reported by each article is highly heterogenous and susceptible to bias (quality assessment table and judgment about risk of bias are available in Supplementary Tables 1 and 2). Demographic, procedural, and outcome data for each study are detailed in Supplementary Table 3. For each article, except the current series, demographic and procedural data are reported for all M2-occlusions, as specific data on distal-M2 occlusions were not available. In the pooled analysis, the percentage for partial or complete recanalization was 78.19% (95% CI 40.61–94.95); the percentage for sICH was 10.70% (95% CI 2.40–36.86); the percentage for favorable outcome was 58.26% (95% CI 35.24–78.16); and the percentage for mortality at 90 days was 17.49% (95% CI 9.66–29.60). Forest plots for all four major outcomes are available in Supplementary Figure 2.

The systematic review of the literature and meta-analysis is limited by the heterogeneity of the definitions of the distal-M2 segment. The most common definition, and the one used by the ETIS registry, is to define distal-M2 as "distal to the mid-Sylvian point" (Muszynski et al.,[8] de Havenon et al.,[10] and Menon et al.[13]). Other definitions encountered in the literature include: "immediately proximal to or at the M2–M3 junction" (Romano et al.[14]

and Haussen et al.[15]), "second half of an M2 branch" (de Castro Afonso et al.[12]), "after 1-cm within the middle cerebral artery bifurcation" (Ospel et al.[16]), and "distal M2 branches" (Ivan et al.[9]). Tomsick et al.[11] created a new segmentation system dividing the MCA into trunk, division, division-branch, and branch, which has been criticized by other authors.[6] This lack of consensus on the definition of the distal-M2 segment of the MCA makes it hard to draw definite conclusions from the pooled data of the meta-analysis as it is highly susceptible to selection bias.

The other main issue we encountered in the elaboration of the meta-analysis was the overall poor and heterogeneous reporting of outcome data on distal-M2 thrombectomy, which could be explained by the fact that distal-M2 occlusions were not the main focus of these articles.

The recanalization rate for distal-M2 occlusions is high across the studies included, between 84.7% and 100%, with the exception of Tomsick et al.[11] (29%). Their results can be explained by the fact that they are drawn from a *post-hoc* analysis of IMS III, one of the early RCT that did not show an additional benefit of EVT over best medical treatment alone. This low reperfusion rate may be explained by the fact that most of the devices used in this study were first-generation mechanical thrombectomy devices, considered today as obsolete.[17]

In conclusion of this review, EVT seems safe and effective across studies resulting in a high recanalization rate; however, prospective randomized studies are needed. A collective effort to better define the distal-M2 segment must be made, especially for future RCTs.

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Appendix 1. Endovascular Treatment in Ischemic Stroke (ETIS) Investigators

Rothschild Foundation

Michel Piotin, Raphael Blanc, Hocine Redjem, Simon Escalard, Jean-Philippe Desilles, François Delvoye, Stanislas Smajda, Benjamin Maïer, Solène Hebert, Mikael Mazighi, Mikael Obadia, Candice Sabben, Pierre Seners, Igor Raynouard, Ovide Corabianu, Thomas de Broucker, Eric Manchon, Guillaume Taylor, Malek Ben Maacha, Laurie-Anne Thion, Augustin Lecler, Julien Savatovsjy.

Foch Hospital

Adrien Wang, Serge Evrard, Maya Tchikviladze, Nadia Ajili, Bertrand Lapergue, David Weisenburger-Lile, Lucas Gorza, Géraldine Buard, Oguzhan Coskun, Arturo Consoli, Federico Di Maria, Georges Rodesh, Sergio Zimatore, Morgan Leguen, Julie Gratieux, Fernando Pico, Haja Rakotoharinandrasana, Philippe Tassan, Roxanna Poll, Sylvie Marinier.

CHU Lyon

Norbert Nighoghossian, Roberto Riva, Omer Eker, Francis Turjman, Laurent Derex, Tae-Hee Cho, Laura Mechtouff, Anne-Claire Lukaszewicz, Frédéric Philippeau, Serkan Cakmak, Karine Blanc-Lasserre, Anne-Evelyne Vallet.

CHU Bordeaux

Gaultier Marnat, Florent Gariel, Xavier Barreau, Jérôme Berge, Patrice Menegon, Igor Sibon, Ludovic Lucas, Stéphane Olindo, Pauline Renou, Sharmila Sagnier, Mathilde Poli, Sabrina Debruxelles, François Rouanet, Thomas Tourdias, Jean-Sebastien Liegey, Pierre Briau, Nicolas Pangon.

CHU Nantes

Romain Bourcier, Lili Detraz, Benjamin Daumas-Duport, Pierre-Louis Alexandre, Monica Roy, Cédric Lenoble, Hubert Desal, Benoît Guillon, Solène de Gaalon, Cécile Preterre.

CHRU-Nancy

Benjamin Gory, René Anxionnat, Marc Braun, Anne-Laure Derelle, Liang Liao, François Zhu, Emmanuelle Schmitt, Sophie Planel, Sébastien Richard, Lisa Humbertjean, Gioia Mione, Jean-Christophe Lacour, Marian Douarinou, Gérard Audibert, Marcela Voicu, Ionel Alb, Marie Reitter, Madalina Brezeanu, Agnès Masson, Adriana Tabarna, Iona Podar, Pauline Bourst, Marine Beaumont, Bailiang Chen (Mitchelle), Sarah Guy, Valérie Georges, Fatiha Bechiri.

CHU Limoges

Francisco Macian-Montoro, Suzanna Saleme, Charbel Mounayer, Aymeric Rouchaud, Laetitia Gimenez, Alexandre Cosnard.

CHRU Gui de Chauliac

Vincent Costalat, Caroline Arquizan, Cyril Dargazanli, Grégory Gascou, Pierre-Henri Lefèvre, Imad Derraz, Carlos Riquelme, Nicolas Gaillard, Isabelle Mourand, Lucas Corti, Federico Cagnazzo, Adrien ter Schiphorst.

CHU Rennes

Quentin Alias, Fakhreddine Boustia, Jean-Christophe Ferre, Hélène Raoult, Jean-Yves Gauvrit, Stéphane Vannier, Maud Guillen, Thomas Ronziere, Veronica Lassalle, Clément Tracol, Cécile Malrain, Soizic Boinet.

CHU Pitié-Salpêtrière

Frédéric Clarençon, Eimad Shotar, Nader Sourour, Stéphanie Lenck, Kévin Premat, Yves Samson, Anne Léger, Sophie Crozier, Flore Baronnet, Sonia Alamowitch, Laure Bottin, Mathon Yger, Vincent Degos.

CHU Kremlin-Bicêtre

Laurent Spelle, Christian Denier, Olivier Chassin, Vanessa Chalumeau, Jildaz Caroff, Olivier Chassin, Laura Venditti, Mariana Sarov, Nicolas Legris.

Hôpital Saint-Anne

Olivier Naggara, Wagih Ben Hassen, Grégoire Boulouis, Christine Rodriguez-Régent, Denis Trystram, Basile Kerleroux, Guillaume Turc, Valérie Domigo, Catherine Lamy, Julia Birchenall, Clothilde Isabel, François Lun.

CHU Toulouse

Alain Viguier, Christophe Cognard, Anne-Christine Januel, Jean-Marc Olivot, Nicolas Raposo, Fabrice Bonneville, Jean-François Albucher, Lionel Calviere, Jean Darcourt, Guillaume Bellanger, Philippe Tall.

CHU Caen

Emmanuel Touze, Charlotte Barbier, Romain Schneckenburger, Marion Boulanger, Julien Cogez, Sophie Guettier, Maxime Gauberti.

CHU Brest

Serge Timsit, Jean-Christophe Gentric, Julien Ognard, Francois Mathias Merrien.

CHU Rouen
Ozlem Ozku Wermester, Evelyne Massardier, Chrysanthi Papagiannaki, Aude Triquenot, Margeaux Lefebvre.

CH Bayonne
Frédéric Bourdain, Patricia Bernady, Laurent Lagoarde-Segot, Hélène Cailliez, Louis Veunac, David Higue.

CHU Strasbourg
Valérie Wolff, Veronique Quenardelle, Valerie Lauer, Roxana Gheoca, Irene Pierre-Paul, Raoul Pop, Remy Beaujeux, Dan Mihoc, Monica Manisor, Julien Pottecher, Alain Meyer, Thiên-Nga Chamaraux-Tran.

CH Vannes
Anthony Le Bras, Sarah Evain, Arnaud Le Guen.

CH Pau
Sebastian Richter, Regis Hubrecht, Stéphanie Demasles, Bruno Barroso.

CH Perpignan
Denis Sablot, Geoffroy Farouil, Maxime Tardieu, Philippe Smadja, Sabine Aptel, Ian Seiler.

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